DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 635 TE 001 302

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The Teaching of Chaucer in Fifth and Sixth Forms.
Pub Date Dec 67.
Note-7p.
Journal Cit-Opinion, The Journal of the South Australian English Teachers' Assn.; v11 n3 p29-34 Dec 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
Descriptors-*Characterization (Literature), *English Instruction, *English Literature, Figurative Language, Grade 11, Grade 12, Irony, Literary Conventions, Literary Influences, Literary Styles, Medieval Literature, *Medieval Romance, Middle English, Poetry, *Secondary Education, Teaching Methods
Identifiers-*Chaucer Geoffrey

The teacher can sucessfully present Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" to 11th- and 12th-grade students by concentrating on "The Prologue" and one of the tales--e.g., "The Pardoner's Tale." The structure and plan of the entire work, however, should first be considered before its various parts can be fully understood. Chaucer's skill and subtlety, then, gradually become apparent as individual parts are (1) heard on record, (2) translated and paraphrased, noting French borrowings and differences between Middle and modern English in pronunciation, grammatical endings, and meanings, (3) compared with their literary antecedents from Italian Renaissance literature, and (4) examined for an understanding of Chaucer's milieu. Before "The Pardoner's Tale" can be properly explicated, it must also be identified as part of a master framework, and the descriptions of the physical characteristics, attitudes, and rank of the Pardoner, his cronies, and the other pilgrims considered in detail. Then, the ironies between what the Pardoner is and what he says become clear, and various interpretations of the tale's meaning can be debated. (Books and other aids pertaining to Chaucer's tales and times are noted.) (JB)

ED030635

# Opinion

IS THE JOURNAL OF THE
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
ENGLISH TEACHERS'
ASSOCIATION INC.

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DECEMBER, 1967 VOLUME 11, No. 3

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# *The Teaching of Chaucer in Fifth and Sixth Forms*

**A lecture delivered at the Post College Course, Armidale, 5th September, 1967,**

**by Trevor Brew, English-History Master, Armidale High School**

I feel I should preface my remarks by stating that I am not trying to set myself up as an authority on Chaucer—far from it. I selected this topic because it has presented me with a number of problems—problems I feel have to be faced by fellow-classroom teachers.

For the purposes of this lecture, I propose to consider approaches to the **General Prologue** first and then to the **Pardoner's Tale.**

From the outset, the students should be made aware of the over-all plan of the Canterbury Tales with the twenty-nine pilgrims expected to tell tales on the way to and from Canterbury.

As Mediaeval verse, especially Chaucer's, was meant to be heard and spoken, and not read silently, we would be failing in our job if we did not first give consideration to both an oral and an aural approach. The record, of course, is the most obvious aid. However, it would not be enough to just play the record right through with the children listening. It is advisable to have the students following with their texts. The nature of the **General Prologue** *lends itself to treatment in sections. For example,* the first eighteen lines form a unit on their own and could be dealt with as such.

After playing the first eighteen lines the teacher could ask the students if they noticed any difference between the Middle English pronunciation and the Modern English. They should note at least the pronunciation of some endings which we would not pronounce today. We might then ask what the author intended in his introduction and what we make of it. Rhythm and rhyme should be noted and some scansion should help here. Muriel Bowden in "a Commentary on the **General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales**" sees in the introduction a special 14th century appeal in "precedent and associations"—a model passage from Guido delle Colonne's "Historia Destructionis Troiae".

> It was the season when the sun, hastening under the turning circle of the zodiac, had now entered its course under the sign of Ram, in which the equinox is celebrated, when the days of the beginning of spring are equal in length to the nights; them when the season begins to soothe eager mortals in its clear air; then when as the snows melt, gently blowing zephyrs wrinkle up the waters; then when fountains gush out into slender jars; then when moistures breathing out from the earth's bosom are raised up within trees and branches to their tops, wherefore, seeds leap forth, crops grow, fields become green brightened by flowers of various colours; then when trees put on renewed foliage everywhere; then when the earth is decked with grass, and birds sing, sounding like the cithera in the euphony of sweet harmony. (Compare this with the opening to the **Prologue).**

Here are nearly all the actual expressions Chaucer uses; the time is in the Ram, when moisture ("licour") flows through every sap-vessel ("veyne") after the drought of March; the sweet zephyrs have quickened ("inspired") the tender tops of the branches ("croppes"); the young sun is now beyond the spring equinox and the second half of Aries; the birds sing in melody; even the very repetition of the word "when" seems to be borrowed from

Guido. Chaucer adds one detail to Guido's conventional picture: the little birds, incited by nature in their desires ("so priketh hem nature in hir corages"), sleep all the night with open eye! Mediaeval natural history taught that nightingales did not sleep in the mating season. However, Chaucer goes further than literary convention as the traditional spring picture is not followed by the usual romantic or heroic events, but by the freshly matter-of-fact statement of lines 12 to 14—

> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
> And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes.
> To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes,

A number of other extracts could then be dealt with along similar lines by reference to the individual portraits of the pilgrims. Some variety could be introduced here with teacher and student attempts at a type of "pidgin" Chaucer. Naturally, time would not permit a thorough treatment of each pilgrim's portrait by the teacher, but use could be made of lecturettes and essays here. The pilgrims can be divided into five groups—an outstanding one could be selected from each for concentrated discussion. Contrasts in persons and themes should stand out, e.g., Pardoner & Summoner (Physical), Friar & Prioress (Moral); honesty v. knavery, charity and generosity v. avarice.

The study of some selected passages can also help in the integration of language study. Some questions are bound to emerge and these should not be neglected. For instance, attention might be drawn to the similarity in form with some words of Modern English, but having a difference in meaning. If we look at the second passage (lines 79-85), on the duplicated sheet 1, we should be able to bring up some of the points likely to be discussed. For example, a student might easily assume that Chaucer's description of the young squire as a "lusty batcheler" is quite clearly to him, but it should be pointed out that to Chaucer a "batcheler" was a use of the term at University level—a Batchelor being a probationer for the honour of knighthood. (It is also significant to note the full degree of Master.) Similarly, in the next line, "With lokkes crulle," it could be misinterpreted unless we realized that "crulle" is an early form of "curly" and not "cruel." Note also that "y" in Chaucer can often be replaced by "i", the plural ending "es" on "lokkes" and that "year" had no inflection—a survival of O.E.—we still have "sheep", "swine", Chaucer using "hors" in a similar fashion.

Grammatical endings could be referred to at this point and students of foreign languages could also contribute to the discussion.

The fact that French borrowings were common (e.g. chyrachie in line 85) provides a starting point for some interesting background facts on Chaucer's life which the students should be able to investigate through assignment.

A check should be made as to the student's progress through paraphrasing exercises after the children have been led to appreciate that Chaucer study is not the formidable task it first appeared to be. It should not be beyond the children to appreciate the poetic aspects of imagery, structure, tone of the narration, choice of words and use of rhythm. They should also be able to relate Chaucer to other poets in the course.

Let us look at one of the portraits in particular (11.669-714)—the Pardoner, a fitting companion for the lecherous Summoner. I would read through the first 22 lines as a unit (or listen to them on the record) and then provide some help with translation and interpretation of specific points. For example, the words "Come hider, love, to me!" are addressed to the evil Summoner who welcomes the unnatural advances of his "boyfriend"

trumpeting forth with his bass accompaniment thus emphasizing his perverted friendship. The word "styf" also has a sexual connotation—there were plenty of other words available to Chaucer at the time. (An interesting view on this song can be found on page 41 of Wagenknecht.)

Another possible and probable intended interpretation of these early lines is that Chaucer is alluding to the unscrupulous plotting between summoners and pardoners to fleece the people. This is ironical, since the summoners were supposed to report on illegal action of pardoners.

The significance of the relationship between the two scoundrels is reinforced by the description of the physical qualities of the Pardoner. The following aspects should be pointed out:

(a) The Pardoner's wax-yellow hair which is straight as a hank of flax, and which is spread as best it can be in thin clusters over his shoulders, indicates, according to Chaucer's contemporary belief, "an impoverished blood, lack of virility, and effeminacy of mind; and the sparser the hair the more cunning and deceptive the man." (Prof. Curry's book, **Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences.)**

(b) Professor Curry also points out that Polemon, a famous physiognomist of the 2nd century A.D., wrote that glaring hare eyes indicated "a man given to folly, a glutton, a libertine, and a drunkard." There is sufficient evidence later in the Tales to support the opinion that Chaucer's Pardoner was such a man.

(c) The small, high voice and an absence of beard also typify effeminacy.

(d) Note Chaucer's comment in line 691: "I believe he was a gelding or a mare."

From the physical description of the Pardoner with all its associations we move on to the occupation of this mediaeval church official and the way he goes about it. The students should realize that, although the most striking features of the Pardoner's work were the selling of indulgences and the selling of relics, preaching was equally important in the Middle Ages. (See p. 277 of Bowden.)

The functions and purpose of a Pardoner should prove of interest to the students, and they should realize how this pardoner took advantage of the opportunities for dishonesty. His skill in oratory from the pulpit could well be emphasized here in discussion. Chaucer's irony also appears here in the line instances—1.708.

One suggested grouping of the pilgrims is: (note the role of rank)

(a) The military: The knight, the squire, the yeoman.
(b) The clergy: The prioress, the nun's priest, the monk, the friar.
(c) The middle class: (including the Wife of Bath, the marchant, the their cook, the shipman, the Doctor of Physic.
Clerk of Oxenford, Sergeant of Law, the Franklin, the 5 Gildsmen,
(d) Poor but honest: Parson and the Plowman.
(e) Churls (term of disparagement)—see note p. 88 of Coghill & Tolkien end. of **The Pardoner's Tale)** and rascals (the manciple is an exception), the Miller, the Reeve, the Summoner and the Pardoner.

Towards the end of the course the children should be asked to consider such questions as:

1. Does the gallery present any sophisticated artistry in the order of its presentation?
2. What outstanding examples of comparison and contrast are there? e.g., the doctor of physic and the poor parson.
3. Can you detect any relationship between Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the pilgrim? What role does each play?

In dealing with the **Pardoner's Tale** itself we haven't the assistance, at the moment, of a recording. However, it is hoped that it won't be long before this position is rectified. Nevertheless, if the Sixth Formers have had a satisfactory experience with the **Prologue** in the Fifth Form, then they should be able to cope with the reading of **The Pardoner's Tale.**

The students should again be reminded of the fact that this tale is part of a meaningful whole—part of a major framework. To reinforce this, reference should be made to (a) the description of the Pardoner in the **General Prologue,** (b) the words of the host at the end of the **Physician's Tale,** where we also find the demand from the Company for a moral tale, and (c) the Pardoner's Prologue .( Refer if necessary to p.339 of the Hieatt & Hieatt translation.)

A starting point for the Tale proper would be a reference to the use of rhyming couplets and the iambic pentameter—the Heroic Verse which Chaucer derived from Dante and Boccaccio. (See pp.38-9 of Coghill & Tolkien edn. for an explanation of this or the introduction to the Daniel Cook edn. or others.)

It is helpful to break the tale into its natural divisions and subdivisions. This is a simple exercise which should not present the students with any difficulty. In the course of this exercise the term "exemplum" will probably emerge—if a student does not mention it, then I feel the teacher should. At this stage it will be helpful to point out that the rules of rhetoric were very important to the mediaeval poet. (Note pp. 1617 of Coghill & Tolkien edn. for use of rhetoric—Chaucer was not a slave to it.)

In **The Pardoner's Tale** we are presented with a monologue by the Pardoner—a monologue, however, which has plenty of variety in it. Much of this variety is provided by the range of voices employed by the Pardoner. By studying the relationship between what is said and how it is said, the student should be able to appreciate the skill and subtlety of Chaucer, especially in his use of rhetoric.

The students should be able to find the following range of voices in the **Pardoner's Prologue** and **Tale:**

The passages referred to are included at the end of the article.

(i) Note the intimate tone of private conversation. Here he exposes his preaching technique.

(ii) Note the dignified reference to Biblical parallels as part of his emotional onslaught on his listeners.

(iii) Here we have the intense rhetorical apostrophes in earthy, colloquial, vigorous terms.

(iv) and (vi) Chaucer adds further variety by fitting in conversations of conscientious speaking. There are of course other examples and the students should be asked to volunteer them.

(v) is an example of a public exclamation or exhortation.

(vii) The possibility that there is religious sincerity in these lines referred to as the benediction.

There are two questions that should provoke discussion and need consideration. The first is:

Who is the old man met by the three revellers? Some suggest that he is the Wandering Jew; others that he represents Old Age as death's messenger; others that he is Death himself, while some see him as the undegenerate Adam himself. Or is he just an old man? More than just an old man, surely, if we look at line 760, where he gives the revellers precise directions how to find death. There seems to be some atmosphere of the supernatural about him. (There is an interesting article by W. J. B. Owen in Wagenknecht on the question of the old man.)

The second question to consider is: What is the spirit of the Tale from the end of the sermon to the end? Is there a shift in feeling? George Kittredge has something to say on this. (p. 122 of Wagenknecht.)

There is also quite a good summing up of **The Pardoner's Tale** in David M. Zesmer's "Guide to English Literature—From Beowulf through Chaucer and Mediaeval Drama", p. 246. This book also gives us a glimpse at some of Chaucer's contemporaries.

To conclude, I would like to comment on a few aids and books: There is a film available through the Visual Education Centre at Burwood on Chaucer's England. It is simple and lasts only about twenty minutes, but gives a good glimpse of people of Chaucer's time and some of the pilgrims from the Tales.

A coloured movie entitled "Chaucer and the Pardoner's Tale" is available for members of the N.S.W. Film Council.

The Argo record in Middle English of "The Prologue" is quite good, while there is a Modern English Coghill version of "The Pardoner's Tale" and "The Miller's Tale" also available on record.

A performance by the travelling actor Rob Inglis is also worthwhile as well as entertaining. The Audio-Visual Centre, 5 Conder Street, Burwood, 21134, N.S.W., has a recording of "The Pardoner's Tale" especially made for the N.S.W. Department of Education. It is read in Middle English by Rob Inglis, and one section of the record has a pronunciation guide by M. L. Claflin of Macquarie University.

The following books should prove worthwhile:—


BOWDEN, Muriel: **A Commentary on the "General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales"**—recommended for School Libraries—good notes and commentary.

BREWER, D.: **Chaucer in his Time**—interesting illustrations accompany this commentary. (Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., London.)

HUSSEY, M.; SPEERING, A. C., & WINNY, J.: **An Introduction to Chaucer** (a Cambridge Uni. Press Paperback).

ROBERTSON, D. W.; **A Preface to Chaucer—Studies in Mediaeval Perspectives** (Princeton, Oxford).

SCHOECK & TAYLOR eds.: **Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales**—for Chaucer and the Rhetoricians. (A Notre Dame Book.)

WAGENKNECHT, E.: **Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism**—very interesting discussions on the "Old Man" and the ending of "The Pardoner's Tale" in particular.

ZESMER, D. M.: **Guide to English Literature**—for Chaucer's place amongst his contemporaries. (College Outline Series No. 53.)


Some passages referred to in considering **The Pardoner's Tale:**

(i) From the prologue to **The Pardoner's Tale.**
(Line references for the Coghill and Tolkien text and the Daniel Cook ed.)

I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,
And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,
I preche so as ye han herd bifoore,
And telle an hundred false japes moore. (ll. 103-6; 391-4)

(ii)

Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,
Fro Paradys to labour and to wo
Were driven for that vyce, it is no drede. (ll. 217-9; 505-7)

(iii)

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod!
Fulfilled of donge and of corrupcioun, (ll. 246-7; 534-5)

(iv)

And on the ground, which is my modres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And eye, 'Leeve moder, leet me in!
Lo, how I vanysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn! (ll. 441-4; 729-32)

(v)

Com up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!
Youre names I entre heer in my rolle anon;
Into the blisse of hevene shul ye gon. (ll. 622-4; 910-2)

(vi)

"O Lord!" quod he, "if so were that I myghte
Have al this tresor to myself allone,
Ther is no man that lyveth under the trone
Of God that sholde lyve so murye as I! (ll. 552-5; 840-3)

(vii)

And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
For that is best; I wol yow not deceyve: (ll. 628-30; 916-18)